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STATE FOR EUR/SCE

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: POLICE BLOCK HOOLIGANS FROM REACHING
GREEK MISSION

REF: SKOPJE 143

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) A splinter group from a peaceful 2,000-person rally in downtown Skopje in support of Macedonia's constitutional name attempted to march on the Greek Liaison Office (GLO) the night of February 27. Forcefully intercepted by the police, the group of protestors wreaked havoc on nearby residential buildings, cars and shops, and injured 9 policemen and 2 journalists. The police swiftly arrested eight individuals believed to have organized the violence, and further reinforced already stepped up protection around the GLO and the U.S. Embassy. End summary

PEACEFUL RALLY SUPPORTS CONSTITUTIONAL NAME

¶2. (SBU) Chanting "Macedonia, Macedonian, Macedonians," some 2,000 protestors held a peaceful rally in Skopje's main square in the early evening hours of February 27. The organizers of the protest, a youth NGO and a group of intellectuals, expressed their dissatisfaction with the ongoing UN name negotiations (reftel) and urged the crowd to stand up for Macedonia's national identity and the preservation of the constitutional name. Heavy police presence throughout the city helped ensure a peaceful and orderly protest.

SPLINTER GROUP TRIES TO STIR TROUBLE...

¶3. (SBU) As the protest concluded, a group of young demonstrators moved to the area around the Greek Liaison Office (GLO), more than a kilometer from the rally venue. According to the head of the Skopje City Police, around 500 demonstrators blocked alleys near the GLO and attempted to break through the heavy police cordon protecting the Greek mission. Unsuccessful in their attempt, the demonstrators pelted the police with stones and approached the GLO through the parking lot of an adjacent building, damaging cars and shops in the process. An Alpha special forces police squad arrived at that moment to help the Rapid Deployment Unit (RDU) forces, and managed to push the crowd away from the area. Shortly afterward, the group was dispersed and traffic in the area was normalized. New police reinforcements arrived and remained at the GLO through the morning of February 28.

...WREAKS HAVOC ON NEIGHBORHOOD

¶4. (SBU) The head of the Skopje City Police told us February 28 the crowd had damaged three RDU vehicles and the windows of several shops and apartments. Eight police officers were lightly injured and one Alpha special forces officer was hospitalized. Media and the police reported that the group near the GLO also attacked a TV crew and a print journalist.

POLICE ARREST KNOWN CRIMINAL FOR INCITING VIOLENCE

¶5. (SBU) The police arrested eight individuals, including the purported group leader, for attacking police and disturbing peace and order. The group leader, a known criminal and drug dealer, was suspected of having caused the injuries of the hospitalized Alpha officer. The police will determine today whether misdemeanor or criminal charges will be filed.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) The troubling violence that followed last night's protest was summarily condemned by the media as "disgraceful" and "unhelpful to the Macedonian cause." Allegedly incited by provocateurs and known criminals, the violent acts were contained by well-organized police forces stationed throughout the city, including at the U.S. Embassy. We will follow up with the Ministry of Interior to see what actions they are planning to take to prosecute the instigators, and to encourage a continued robust police presence around the Greek mission.

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